

INTRODUCING BIBLIODRAMA

To the Spiritually Inclined and the Professionally Prepared,

I hope to serve the needs of two audiences, and in the end to show how they can help each other. The first are religious and spiritual persons from Western culture, and the second are educators and healers generally, but especially practitioners of theater, sociodrama and psychodrama. I shall begin with those who have an interest in sacred literature.

Toward Making Religious Education More Effective

Institutional religion has survived on a steady diet of didactic presentations of Bible content, with an occasional nod to rehearsed drama. Amateur staging at local synagogues and churches has probably been of greater value for the participants than the spectators, with the exception of those whose vicarious identification with their own children maximizes parental attentiveness. Increased family support has made it worthwhile.

The difficulty with amateur theater, practiced on an occasional basis, is that it is not *cost effective* (if I may stretch a metaphor). The effort required for even a modest production is considerable, and the actual Bible content learned is not proportional to the time expended. Actually, I think that's OK, though it is like studying Latin to improve the learning of French. Every educator knows that if the goal is to learn French, it is more efficient to bypass the Latin. Likewise here, if the sole goal is the learning of Bible content, the usual way will cover more territory---though it will be less fun.

But what of professional theater? (I include in this category those community supported dramas, such as the annual Ramona production in Hemet, California and the Passion Play in Europe). Professional theater presentations provide a vastly superior product, of course, but in our information surfeited computer, TV and movie dominated culture, involvement of the target audience is minimal. A steady diet of videos and movies leads to an inevitable decline in interest over the long haul.

Two or three generations ago, 'progressive' educators shifted the accent from Bible content to the direct teaching of values, but this proved less interesting than the Bible content the grassroots were accustomed to. Besides, the research showed it was not

particularly effective anyway. We should've known that in advance, for the pioneer work of Hartshorne and May (*Studies in the Nature of Character, 1928-1930*) demonstrated that values such as honesty do not exist as unitary phenomena. Persons honest in one situation were often dishonest in another. How can church schools afford to overlook this early interest of The Religious Education Association carried out at Columbia university under the name of the *Character Education Inquiry*?

Thirty years ago Fannie and George Shaffel published *Role Playing for Social Values: Decision-Making in the Social Studies*. Fifteen years later they followed this up with *Role Playing in the Curriculum*. Their approach overcame the limitations of the didactic teaching of values, but it required skill, and religious educators were disinclined to make the additional effort. Through involving the whole person with action methods it was possible to achieve the desired transfer effect to life beyond the classroom. They did not address Bible content specifically, which was too bad, for otherwise educators who'd fallen back on the old-fashioned didactic approach might've given the possibility another look. This is essentially what we've been doing with Bibliodrama.

If persons associated with religious institutions have not been exposed to the method we use, their obvious option is either to employ persons who have the skill, or to study with them and acquire the skill themselves. Inasmuch as educators must be convinced first, the place to begin is with seeing Bibliodramatists in action. Better yet, coming in not as observers, but as participants. In this way a few talented persons may bridge the gap between amateur and professional.

Perhaps some may go all the way to become psychodramatists and thereby exploit the full potential of action methodology. I'm not suggesting that they become psychotherapists too (though it wouldn't hurt)! At the present time psychodrama has been moving toward an educational emphasis, directed toward fulfilling the needs of normal persons, who are actually in a better position to get more out of the method than the mentally disturbed. That's right, even though psychodrama was developed to benefit the ill, those who are healthy can make an even more extensive and flexible use of it.

Bear in mind these generalizations:

1. Stories put into action are more memorable than stories skillfully told.
2. Stories enacted find more points of contact with everyday life. The implicit values find a wider range of application.
3. Persons involved in action are likely to learn more about themselves. Their contact with sacred literature in this form should lead to their seeking out relevant Bible passages for their own personal development.
4. Dramatic participation renders a person more open to the possibility of commitment to a divine calling. If we believe God is seeking to get through to us, what better way to invite the Holy Spirit in?
5. Though action methods such as psychodrama were developed in professional work with the mentally ill, we've come to a fuller appreciation of their applicability to the education and growth of normal persons. We now know that the healthier one is, the better use one can make of the spontaneous improvisational approaches of psychodrama, drama therapy, sociodrama, and playback theater.

Toward Making Action Methods More Available

Many professionals have lost contact with their own religious roots. We remember what well-intentioned but not too well informed lay teachers and parents have told us, and we're disinclined to be identified with what we've come to consider extreme naivete. But let's be fair. Are those same persons saying the very same things today, and are they saying such things to adults? How much change have we seen since then?

Even if time has in fact bypassed our particular roots, have we looked around for an alternative more consistent with our present outlook? It's conservatives who are more likely to seek us out, and they're the ones we're prone to resist. So if we're Jewish, how about a reformed synagogue? If protestant, perhaps a more liberal denomination? If Roman Catholic, a younger priest caught up in the spirit of Vatican II may be more congenial to our needs.

I make these suggestions, not so much for the sake of your soul as for your business, and your ability to sincerely serve the need of a vast untapped market. If in the process your soul improves, so much the better! I assume you recognize I use

the word 'soul' in its original etymological sense as referring to the whole person.

As you become more knowledgeable in religion and spirituality, you will discover that many troubled religious persons have a very circumscribed grasp of their own tradition. They are in the grip of stress which gives them tunnel vision. Often persons from the same heritage could provide the assist they need, but the trust isn't there, and even experiences from the troubled person's own past which might've been helpful have become inaccessible.

Now that's a familiar story to the professional. We know it is rarely a matter of having the correct information. The problem is not intellectual; it is emotional. Often it is the failure to put into practice the very theory to which one has already given assent, as if that were enough.

That's how it is in their relationship with sacred literature too. Even with a beginner's knowledge of a protagonist's tradition, the professional may be freer to make the connection which conflict denies to the one raised in the tradition. One simply guides toward something the protagonist once knew and facilitates the rediscovery. Or the professional may draw on the resources within the group to re-enact a related scene from sacred literature, or set up a new situation with obvious spiritual implications to give the troubled person an alternate avenue of expression. Professionals may have different solutions for themselves, yet appreciate how meaningful this next step can be for those in their care.

Sacred literature has survived because it is integral to a culture. When cultures are in transition, so are reactions to this or that Bible episode. With a cohesive group, the entire audience participates in this or that role, and reverses role, for as usually happens in such situations, one is on both sides, often outwardly on one side while inwardly on the other. Professionals know how to help get divided persons together --- and if not together, at least open and accepting of plurality, either as an end-in-itself. or as a step along the way to further growth.

The sociodramatic opportunity is enormous for a cohesive group that will give opposing views a respectful hearing, such

as abortion, crime, poverty, disability, racism, sexism, nationalism, economic imperialism, classism, agism...etc. Sociodramatists know how to deal with such issues, but to approach the very same issues through Bibliodrama reduces the heat and increases the light. How often we discover that God is on both sides! If worse comes to worse, *we can let the other fellow be wrong if he wants to be wrong!* That's progress. We can learn from each other.

But what does the professional do when God is given a role? We have interested persons show us what they believe God's role to have been or to be, then have the role represented, just as we would any other role. I have dealt with this in detail in a previous monograph. See *The Presence in Psychodrama, connecting spirituality and religious persons, a pluralistic approach* (1997).

Once you get into it you will discover how smoothly everything fits together. Sacred literature does not present philosophical concepts of God, but the human experience of God, who is perceived to behave in very human-like ways. This is true of all religions, especially those we believe in. The role of Jesus comes readily to Christians, for we are encouraged to become as much like him as we possibly can.

Representing figures from the contemporary religious establishment is another avenue which can be used to advantage. One doesn't have to be Catholic to play the pope --- though it may help. One may privately think that Jesus was simply another human being, but inasmuch as orthodox Christian theology has insisted on affirming the humanity of Jesus too, the task of playing the Jesus role becomes readily accessible to non-Christians.

Once you have re-established yourself with persons interested in and committed to spiritual growth, you will be impressed with how easy they make your job. You'll like them, and you'll like yourself better for liking them. They can use what you have to offer. Be open to learning something from them too. When we take the risk, we learn from one another. Bear in mind these generalizations:

1. If you've encountered little religion or spirituality in your professional practice, this reflects your secular self-presentation. Protagonists or patients may simply have considered the subject off-limits, rather than as lacking relevance to their daily lives..

2. Sacred literature provides a vehicle for introducing spiritual concerns safely. When we have seen and heard each other deal with a Biblical episode, we are freer to speak of how this affects us personally.

3. The idiosyncratic reaction to some segment of sacred literature may provide a clue to unresolved issues in one's life, and at the same time offer a way of exploring new possibilities under the guise of representing history.

4. Sacred literature is by definition shared. Persons who have been alienated may establish bonds with others and reenter the community from which they have been estranged or find themselves members of another community where they can really belong.

5. Through Bibliodrama we can address existential questions. We recognize that religions have passed through a series of stages, providing different reactions at different times. Answers proffered are outside empirical knowledge but accessible on the grounds of faith. Individuals and groups discover a basis for discussion, growth and commitment. Facing rather than avoiding issues, *we stand over the abyss of nothingness and take it into ourselves.* Positions consciously taken assist rather than undermine us. We are free to revisit them, to re-examine how we arrived there, and take another avenue, if it seems the appropriate thing to do. From a psychodramatic point of view we are building our role repertoire and increasing our spontaneity. Who knows what creativity may bubble up from within us -- or descend upon us?

6. Just as insight occurs in analysis and integration in psychodrama, so unscheduled, unanticipated transformations may take place in Bibliodrama. Learning here is more than cognitive achievement, it is whole life.